Chapter 4 - The Topography of Peoples' Lives: Geography until 1314

Sally M Foster

Societies are much messier than our theories of them, all the more so in this shadowy period of history when Scotland emerges from 9,500 years or so of prehistoric occupation into a time when documentary sources are still few and the extensive archaeological resource is scarcely yet tapped. Inevitably, if somewhat reluctantly, we are often forced to fall back on studying those physical remains that involved a higher investment of human labour and which, if in earth and stone, have best survived the ravages of time. Fortunately, we can be reasonably confident that these will be products of the impact and articulation of the big new ideas that resulted in changes in society, the ones we want to know about. Alas, the finer grain of human existence, particularly that of the disempowered, remains largely elusive. Any overview can be only simplistic, not least given the diversity of human practice.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, to be a Scot meant to be an inhabitant of a historically defined kingdom with an increasingly monetary economy where a stable monarchy with mature and regularised tools of government and a regional church structure ruled over a political entity with geographic boundaries little different from those of today's Scotland (excepting that Shetland and Orkney were still Norwegian, Berwick, the Isle of Man and parish of Kirkandrews were yet to be lost). This is not to say that regional identities were not important, but that new perceptions of self and community had evolved over a lengthy period. To understand how this might have happened we need to recognise and explore the revolutionary, often dramatic, transitions that characterise this period. First and foremost of these is the move from a kindred-based network of locally-based lordships to more formalised and distant, non-kinship-based relations of lordship. Secondly, although people in some parts of southern and western Scotland were already Christian by the early sixth century, the major missionary movement began early in our period. Quickly making its mark, the relationship between the church and secular authorities is critical to our understanding of this period, not least since the new ideology brought with it the new technology of writing. This was the means by which new systems of administration could be introduced. The power of both secular and ecclesiastical authorities ultimately stemmed from how they generated wealth from the resources of the land, notably agricultural surpluses, and it is to this that our attention will first turn. (Exploitation of marine resources for anything but domestic purposes does not loom large until the second millennium AD, and then essentially in Norse parts of Scotland and the burghs).

The Scotland of 550 AD was already largely deforested and at this time suffering from adverse climatic conditions. This may have induced a period of social instability. The majority of its inhabitants were farmers practicing a mixed economy (arable and animals), but also tapping into the rich natural resources of the land and sea. Enormous regional diversity in domestic architecture was the norm, whatever the building materials, and details of farming strategies clearly differ. We can imagine a landscape where the better land is busy with unenclosed individual farmsteads and hamlets,

punctuated by the occasional fortified dwelling places of the local elite, burial places and ceremonial centres, including, in the south, the occasional church and graveyard. This rural underbelly is a constant dynamic throughout our period. The level and precise source of agricultural wealth was dictated by a range of external factors (such as climate) and internal factors (such as available technology, organisation of society, forms of transport and communication).

The finer texture of the landscape, the form and pattern of any enclosures and regularisation of land use, is essentially unknown in the early medieval period, as for preceding millennia. The only significant innovation that has been noted, and so far only in association with a few monastic sites, is the introduction of mould-board plough technology, an improved means of turning the soil. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the picture is still one of diversity (we need only note the range of names for land units and their means of assessment) but with underlying, if asynchronous, trends common across much of the country. Most notable is the adoption of open fields, a European tradition which reached lowland England in the tenth and eleventh centuries. This is the means by which arable land was divided into strips and apportioned to ensure that there was an equitable and regular redistribution of the available resources between the farmers residing in a fermtoun or township, nucleated settlements that appear to be a consequence of feudalism and its influence. Such division of land, known to us by its later name of runrig, is usually characterised by the presence of different type of rig. From the twelfth to thirteenth centuries broad rig, produced by mould-board ploughs, apparently became the standard from Roxburgh to Sutherland. It is debated when the system of infields (used just for arable) and outfields (sporadically used for arable) was introduced. Beyond these was the rougher ground used for hill pasture as well as other resources. In the western Highlands and Islands, it is posited that the system of runrig and associated nucleated settlement postdates the Treaty of Perth (1266), being preceded by a more dispersed settlement pattern and system of field enclosure by different landowners.

Changes in the character of lordship brought with them changes in settlement patterns, none more so than when the Anglo-Norman practices of feudalism were introduced. A feature of such villages was the nearby watermill to which all were obliged to bring their grain for processing. Despite being largely beyond central royal control, aspects of feudal land management practices were apparently also absorbed in the west of Scotland. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries experienced an improvement in the climate which led to a boom in the population, enhanced agricultural productivity, the improvement of more land and the founding of more settlements. Farming became more than a subsistence economy and payments to the lord were increasingly paid in cash. A part of this wealth made its way back into the parish churches and castles that these lords built. A significant factor was the foundation of burghs (chartered towns). These needed efficient rural hinterlands to supply their foodstuffs and raw products; they also provided the stimulus for a wider range of rural industries and were the means by which wealth production could be diversified.

Another notable change in the countryside was the introduction of hunting reserves and parks by Anglo-Norman lords, but also Gaelic lords. Long known to be an elite sport (see Pictish sculpture, for instance), we now see evidence for the demarcation and control of large tracts of land specifically for a leisure activity that was strictly the preserve of royalty and aristocrats.

The notion of permanent settlements in which a significant proportion of the population lived off non-agricultural occupations, such as trade and industry, can be first observed in the early first millennium AD iron-age *oppida* of south-east Scotland. Roman military occupation of southern Scotland did not result in the foundation of any towns, but proto-urban tendencies can be observed in the early medieval power centres, such as the secular fort of Dunadd in Argyll or around the monastery of Whithorn. We can see how highly technical specialisms, such as stone carving, vellum manufacture, manuscript illustration and fine metalworking were taking place in zoned areas under the control of the local secular and ecclesiastical authorities and that the secular lords (at least) were also controlling local and foreign trade. Despite the depredations of the Vikings, in general the increase in trade and centralisation of wealth continued. The big change of the twelfth century was a concerted royal campaign to introduce a standardised and structured entity: towns.

The credit for this initiative lies with the energetic David I (1124-53) who introduced laws intended to encourage and control trade in fixed places, but also William during whose reign (1165-1214) the first burghal charters were issued. A new form of community was created which had its own legal privileges but also responsibilities. Burgesses, the principal landowners, undertook administrative responsibilities on behalf of the king in return for certain rights, and merchant guilds regulated trade (precise arrangements varied from burgh to burgh). Towns were thus effective vehicles for kings to increase their wealth (through collections of market tolls, rent, customs and other dues) and to extend their governance. Unlike early medieval aristocrats and kings who had fairly hands-on control over the trade and specialised crafts in their smaller territories, the Anglo-Norman kings created the means for their wealth and authority to operate at arm's length.

The majority of towns were founded in the east where they had good communications with the hinterland and ready access to North Sea trade. They were also sited where royal authority was weak, such as Moray. As the towns developed, so the influx of people from the countryside increased. Raw and finished products were brought into the burghs. Goods finished within the burgh walls included leather, linen, wool, iron, bone and antler products. To judge from the documentary sources, the prime exports were wool, sheepskins, hides and fish. Trade with Europe was nothing new – Mediterranean and Continental merchants had regularly brought wine, salt, dyes, pottery and other goods to Argyll power centres in the late fifth to eighth centuries AD in return, we presume, for slaves, goods, furs and perhaps cereals. However, the scale, pace, regularisation and orientation of this new trade stands out, even if David I was not starting from scratch; authorised trading places on the Anglo-Saxon model seem likely to have been encouraged by Malcolm III Canmore (1057-93). New markets opened with England, the Low Countries, France, Germany and Norway and we can detect from

documentary and archaeological sources that goods arrived from even further afield. Not only were the native merchants well travelled, but the ordinary townsperson would have been regularly exposed to foreigners, their goods, ideas and culture. Such contact must have had a profound impact on all aspects of Scottish life, with the craftsmen and merchants acting as intermediaries between different walks of life.

We know most about Perth, one of the earliest royal burghs to be founded. It was sited at a crossing point of the Tay, a locality of high significance to Pictish and later kings, an importance not missed by the Romans, who sited a camp nearby. Occupied since at least the tenth century and probably the site of an earlier Pictish settlement that included a church, a new settlement was laid out on a grid pattern within a demarcated boundary that enclosed rectilinear burgage plots comprising a frontage house and multi-purpose backland or rig. Perth rapidly expanded to include a short-lived royal castle and, around its periphery, four religious houses. In general, few new towns were founded during the thirteenth century but tree-ring dating is producing evidence for synchronous late twelfth-/early thirteenth-century development of existing burghs at Perth, Inverness, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Elgin, perhaps the first formal programme of burgh expansion since their establishment and new-found prosperity.

Kirkwall in Orkney is probably *Norway's* best preserved medieval town, still on its original site and retaining its medieval street layout: Kirkwall's urban roots lie in the North Sea Region, not England. A centre from at least the mid-eleventh century, it can be said to become truly urban when the bishopric is transferred here in 1137 and work begins on its splendid Romanesque cathedral (the bishopric was incorporated into the metropolitan see of Trondheim in 1152 or 1153). In contrast to Ireland, the entrepreneurial Norse did not develop urban centres in their Shetland, Faroe, Iceland or Greenland outposts. The status of Kirkwall can be credited to the power of the semi-independent Orkney earldom and Orkney's role as a staging post between the major trading posts of Ireland and Scandinavia.

The development of urban economies stimulated an increase in rural industries: pottery production, extraction of smelting of iron, lead and silver and coal mining. These sometimes involved new practices, such as intensified woodland management or new technologies, such as wind- and water-power or improved methods of firing and glazing pottery. The church was an important vector of many technological and agricultural innovations. In the early medieval period, it was perhaps responsible for the introduction of the horizontal water mill from Ireland or new forms of agricultural practice (mould-board ploughs) and marine exploitation. The Cistercians, one of the reformed religious orders first introduced to Scotland by David I, were renowned across Europe as agricultural innovators, specialising in exploitation of sheep. In Scotland they were able major producers of the wool for which there was much demand in Flanders. Granges run by lay brothers were a new type of monastic farm expressly developed for sheep management.

By the 1350s, burgesses had come to play such an important part in the development of the Scottish nation that this political and legal entity was formally recognised as one of the three estates that made up the Scottish Parliament. The other two estates were the temporal and spiritual lords.

We now need to change the lens and consider what the move from kinship- to non-kinship-based forms of lordship meant on the ground, and how this related to the church. In early medieval Scotland, kin-dominated political structures gradually come to be outgrown by relations of clientship. As understood from contemporary Irish law, clientship generally consisted of the payment of food renders, other tribute and service to a lord in return for land to farm, protection and patronage, a chain of relationships that technically included all in society. At this time, there was more than one hierarchy of kings and different levels of kingliness. The Anglo-Norman vision of kingship was one in which a single royalty held sway over all land and people. Knights who swore allegiance to a monarch could hold land from him in return for military service; the land could then be sub-let. The aim of feudalism was to sever completely any connection between lordship and kin. This was the means to a European-style state where a king would be supported by an appointed royal household, royal officials, a network of local royal officials, and of course Anglo-Norman lords and clerics. These and the complementary legal apparatus were the means by which a kingdom could successfully continue to expand its territories.

Particularly important are the questions of how, when and where the link with kinship-based lordship was severed: when did all chains of clientship relations in any one kingdom extend to a single king? And how different is feudalism from such clientship? Both were means of extending the distance over which a single authority could successfully operate and each facilitated the establishment of new elites whose authority might be acquired rather than inherited by right. With feudalism, the land was technically no longer part of a local lord's tribal inheritance and the land was not owned by the kindred of the people who farmed it. The case can certainly be made for proto-feudal structures existing in eastern and southern parts of early medieval Scotland and that David I's formal feudal structure built on this rather than swept it away. The Gaelic and Hiberno-Norse maritime kingdoms of western Scotland adopted some of the influences and trappings of feudalism, but theirs remained a world in which clan chiefs dominated. This was a personalised form of authority where the status of the group was embodied in its leader. The group was defined by a relationship of kin, although this could be assumed rather than real. Feuding was common and much depended on the chief's ability as war leader to reward his followers with feasts and gifts, and for the individual to be able to assert individual status through appearance (such as clothes and jewellery). Although this clan system is only documented as such from the twelfth century, it may be little different in character from the society that preceded it.

In Pictland and southern Scotland the evidence is amassing for the prevalence of a structured form of land organisation that has implications for our understanding of the development of royal authority across Scotland. In Northumbria, studies are showing how early medieval territorial and social structures (shires) lie at the root of the feudal structures of tenure, taxation and territory. In Pictland there may also be evidence for some analogous structures that are indicative of a sophisticated form of government (see below). Something similar to the shire is also presumed to have existed in the area of the old British kingdoms in south-western Scotland. David I and his successors are associated with a system of thanages, large multiple estates around the size of a rural

parish which were administered by officials acting as intermediaries between king/earl/provincial lord and the rest of the population. While the terminology may belong to David I, there is reason to believe that this form of land division was introduced into Scotland at an earlier date. It has been argued that this system dates from the reign of Malcolm II (1005-34). Seventy or so thanages are known and, whatever their antiquity, their correspondence with the parish system that David I also introduced suggests a common ancient land unit lies behind both.

Thanages can be seen as the widespread centres where relationships of power would have been negotiated. Stephen Driscoll proposes that the three likely main components of the thanage have their origin in an earlier Pictish 'shire': a principal residence or *caput*; portions (*pett*) of agricultural land, perhaps with enclosed main farm and dispersed settlement; and a ceremonial centre for public events associated with lay and royal power. This was a flexible system, allowing for the principal authority of any such shire to be a king, secular or ecclesiastical lord, with a style and form of main residence to match. We cannot say what the relationship was between the people who lived in a *caput* and those who tilled the soil, or whether the resident of the *caput* controlled services and collected dues in their own right or on behalf of a king.

The roots of the Pictish shire systems are more difficult to disentangle. Changes in the eighth and ninth centuries are clearly significant, a pattern clearest in those areas which are known to have royal associations. Prior to this time, the lordly centres were hilltop forts. The available evidence suggests that these are starting to be abandoned around the eighth and ninth centuries and, where new centres have been identified, these are unfortified palaces whose architecture shares more in common with continental forms. The lord's hall is no longer physically elevated, but is architecturally imposing. We are surely seeing a more assured kingship, less dependent in places of residence on the overtly military symbolism of an architecture with prehistoric overtones. Military superiority is still important, but expressed in alternative ways, such as through the iconography of public sculpture (the ninth-century Dupplin Cross is a particularly good example). As to ceremonial centres, Driscoll argues that there is a tendency at this time to create a new type of monument, the open meeting place, where the theatre of power could be publicly orchestrated. The most best-known examples are Scone and Forteviot. The Moot Hill at Scone was probably built at this time for royal inaugurations and proclamations. While each shire might have had a meeting place, those associated with royalty had more complex and important centres. That at Scone became pre-eminent for Alba as a whole at a time when we are confident that significant changes in kingship were taking place. It seems no coincidence that these are often places that would have still had an extensive upstanding landscape of prehistoric monuments. At the same time as creating these public meeting places, local lords were increasingly investing their resources in the patronage of Christian monumental sculpture and, we must assume, the small churches with which these were associated. The church buildings are places that must have had a more restricted audience, being the place where the ecclesiastical and secular elite met. This elitism is reflected in the highly complex iconography of the St Andrews Sarcophagus, a royal burial shrine, whose full and precise meaning would have been accessible and legible to

few. Symbol-bearing cross-slabs with their juxtaposition of Christian and lordly imagery can be seen as a manifestation for wider public consumption of what is happening inside the churches. The physical juxtaposition of the *caput*, church and the meeting places is also marked.

This model of the key elements of a Pictish shire and how it worked can be extended forward in time; the later centres equally being places where rituals of vassalage and clientship were enacted. New architectural packages came with the new feudal lords: earthwork and timber motte-and-bailey castles, ring-works and, later, stone castles. Artificially created topography was used, where needed, to reinforce the new authority in overtly military forms. The towns played an increasingly important role as gathering places for enactment of royal authority and law, although rarely as residences of the nobility. In both town and country, the role of the church in society was also to change dramatically.

It cannot be proved whether the changes observable in eighth and ninth century developments should be attributed to a co-ordinated campaign under the instruction of a royalty that was exerting new forms of authority, but this is a tempting hypothesis.

Pictish symbol-bearing stones are found from Shetland to the Western Isles and down the east coast of Scotland as far as the Forth. The impetus for the creation, spread and repeated use of this common system of symbolism incised on monumental stones is not known (nor indeed its precise meaning). This probably took place sometime in the seventh century and again suggests the involvement of a central authority. Although these sculptures are associated with public places (of burial or meeting, including re-used prehistoric sites), they appear to be appearing in contexts where they are associated with dead individuals and are being used to support the legitimacy of the heirs, perhaps at a time when new social positions needed asserting.

Arguably the main event horizon in this period is the introduction and impact of Christianity. The extension of royal authority went hand-in-glove with the growth of church power; developments in the organisation of one often directly parallel the other. The case has been made that without the combined forward looking and sophisticated planning of the Columban church and state, plus the determined military pressure of the Gaels, *Alba* would not have been created in around 900. Local lords and kings could opt to support the church either by giving it land (and lordship over its inhabitants) or by granting it the right to certain renders from a specified area. They might also patronise proprietary churches on their own land. In this way, Christian edifices became a regular part of the landscape. In comparison to other parts of the British Isles, kings in Scotland were highly active in ecclesiastical affairs. The church promoted a new ideal of kingship and an increasing reliance on the administrative support that the literate clergy could provide. Churches were centres of learning, engines for social change, and Scotland was no backwater; sixth- to eighth-century Iona was one of the pre-eminent cultural centres of Europe.

By the time symbol-bearing cross-slabs appear in the eighth century, Christianity has patently been embraced by the higher echelons (note also the common Insular art style shared by the secular and ecclesiastical elite). The dispersed distribution of the cross-slabs reflects the harnessing of the Christianity to the local power networks; this

can probably be attributed to the widespread energies of the late seventh-century, romanising Columban church of Adomnán and his colleagues, aided by the early eighth-century reforms of king Nechtan.

How the presence of these churches affected the daily lives of the mass of the population is uncertain. A key question is when churches acquired an 'official' as opposed to private function. Meigle, St Vigeans and Govan were clearly royal burial places but did these churches operate as 'minsters' fulfilling pastoral functions? Bishops existed, but their precise role, the extent of any authority and their relationship to secular territories is unclear. Saints' cults became increasingly important as it was recognised that relics and their associated rituals might reinforce royal authority while imposing a shared identity on their territories. In transferring Columban relics from Iona to Dunkeld in 848/9 Cinead mac Ailpin was consciously reinforcing the relationship between his dynasty, its expanded territories and the centre of the church.

The creation of Alba and political redefinition of the identity of this kingdom in the early tenth century may have involved a regularisation and strengthening of the structure of the church, including it bishoprics, but David I has to be credited with the biggest shake-up. As with thanages, he built on what went before, formalising diocesan and parish boundaries. His creation of a new bishopric in Glasgow extended his authority into Strathclyde. Here and elsewhere, this was a means of by-passing earlier kindred-based interests. With his impositions of teinds, the universal extraction of a tenth of all produce to the church, the parish unit was territorially and legally created. Local lords, who had already begun to patronise churches rather than sculpture, now started doing so in greater numbers. Likewise, there was a flurry of cathedral building in the thirteenth century.

Royalty were also exceedingly active in enticing the new monastic orders then popular in Europe to Scotland (Benedictine, Tironesian, Cluniac, Cistercian and Valliscaulian), and in endowing them most generously; likewise, new types of order, such as the Augustinians. At the same time long-established communities, such as Brechin and Dunblane, also prospered. Malcolm III's pious wife, (St) Margaret, began this trend, a policy that was developed by her three kingly sons, notably David I. With time, the patronage of such religious houses broadened as the range of orders to choose from also diversified. Friaries became popular in the thirteenth century because of their active role in towns.

We have traced some of the ways in which the local geography of power changed in Scotland from 550-1314. That this was a time of big new ideas and big expressions of those ideas remain writ large in the landscape, above and below our feet, particularly in our inheritance of sculpture, lordly establishments, towns, monasteries, cathedrals and new parish centres.

Further reading

Campbell, E. (1999), *Saints and Sea-Kings. The First Kingdom of the Scots*, Edinburgh: Canongate/Historic Scotland.

Dixon, P. (2002), *Puir Labourers and Busy Husbandmen. The Countryside of Lowland Scotland in the Middle Ages*, Edinburgh: Birlinn/Historic Scotland.

Dodgshon, R. (2002), *The Age of the Clans: The Highlands from Somerled to the Clearances*, Edinburgh: Birlinn/Historic Scotland.

Driscoll, S. T. (2002), *Alba. The Gaelic Kingdom of Scotland AD 800-1124*, Edinburgh: Birlinn/Historic Scotland.

Foster, S. M. (2004), *Picts Gaels and Scots*, London: B. T. Batsford Ltd/ Historic Scotland.

Yeoman, P. (1995), *Medieval Scotland*, London: B. T. Batsford Ltd/Historic Scotland.